ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 47

WASHINGTONIAN
May 1986

Mr. Yurchenko Goes Back Home

Was It Too Much Wine and Not Enough Women?

By Charles Fenyvesi

Strange but potentially valuable—that was the prophetic assessment of US intelligence officers after meeting Vitaly Yurchenko in 1975, shortly after he was posted in Washington as the KGB officer in charge of overseeing Soviet Embassy personnel. He had the title "first secretary," but in his meetings with FBI officials he made no bones about his real job, and he joked about the responsibility he and the FBI shared in watching over the Soviet diplomatic community.

Yurchenko proposed to meet with the FBI to exchange phone numbers and discuss routine procedures in case anyone under his jurisdiction was arrested, got into a car accident, or died. However, the FBI picked up something else: Yurchenko enjoyed spending time with Americans, and he was impatient with the restrictions placed on him by his wife, by his bosses, by the Soviet system. He hated to have to account for the way he spent his time and money. He drank a lot, swore a lot, and spoke with surprising openness about other Soviet officials even when he was sober. Unmistakably, he was attracted by the freedom of American life.

The FBI found out about an American woman he had picked up in a bar he frequented. A casual affair developed, which, Yurchenko made clear to his US contacts, was not the only one in his life.

"We didn't nail him, but we let him know that we knew all about the American woman," says one US source. "We developed a working relationship—call it an understanding." The source will not say whether Yurchenko supplied information or received any money. "He was not really our agent," the source says, stressing the word "really," "but he agreed to be in touch with us and be helpful when the opportunity presented itself." However, when Yurchenko returned to Moscow in 1980, he said that he would be watched closely, that it would be too dangerous for him to have any contact with Americans.

US officials heard nothing from him until July 25, 1985, when he walked up to a Swiss guard in Rome's Vatican Museum, introduced himself as Colonel Yurchenko of the KGB, and asked to be taken to the American Embassy.

Yurchenko was taken to the Italian police, the Americans were alerted, and he spent a month being debriefed at a US Air Force base in Italy. As a defector, he made a mixed impression. He boasted that he had just been promoted and was the fifth-most important man in the KGB, which US experts questioned. He claimed he had had to flee Moscow because he was in danger of being identified as an American spy by the KGB's rival, the military intelligence GRU.

The story seemed implausible, as was his claim that he had signed his own permission to fly to Italy as the security officer for a delegation of Soviet nuclear scientists attending a conference in Sicily. But he did provide some critical information: The counterintelligence bureau he headed had pinpointed the KGB station chief in London, first secretary Oleg Gordievsky, as a Western spy. Alerted, Gordievsky, a British agent for nineteen years, promptly left the embassy and asked for political asylum.

Yurchenko arrived in the US in the last days of August 1985. He was in high spirits. He said he wanted to start a new life; he was done with his wife, with the Soviet regime. "He kept talking, and he tired everyone out," says one CIA specialist. "He gave us plenty of good information. He seemed to know everything. He was amazing."

The CIA's practice is to assign one officer—known as a handler or babysitter—to an important defector. As many as twenty people do the debriefing—which may go on for a year—but one

Charles Fenyvesi is a writer for *US News & World Report*.

CONTINUED

experienced officer fluent in the defector's language is in control, deciding the defector's schedule and running his new life. In some cases, the handler becomes the defector's lifelong friend.

In Yurchenko's case, several officers were assigned to him, taking turns. None had a good command of colloquial Russian; none warmed to him. His mentor was CIA Director William Casey, who showed an immediate, personal interest in him. Though some experts had serious doubts about some of Yurchenko's statements and pointed to contradictions, Casey was fascinated with Yurchenko and defended him. "Casey behaved as if Yurchenko had been his trophy," says one CIA officer. "Casey kept citing him as the source of all wisdom on the Soviet Union."

Yurchenko's spirits began to flag when his handlers kept stalling in response to his demand that they find his old American girlfriend. When she was finally found, she said she wouldn't have anything to do with him. He blamed his handlers, and his relationship with them worsened.

He also tried to get in touch with the wife of a Soviet diplomat in Canada, with whom he had had an affair in the 1970s, also in Washington. Her reaction was a hysterical rejection, and Yurchenko sank into depression. He became morose and began to drink heavily. He swore at his handlers and demanded to see Casey. In earlier days, Yurchenko had tried to explain the inconsistencies in his testimony; now he turned sullen.

By mid-October, his handlers knew they faced a crisis. They hastily ar-

UPI/BETTMANN NEWSPHOTOS

Vitaly Yurchenko: The spy who twice came in from the cold.

ranged social occasions with people who spoke Russian. Included were Soviet refugees, who were told not to ask questions but to cheer him up and talk about the good life that awaited him. Yurchenko paid little attention, and he kept drinking heavily, arguing with his handlers, who asked him to slow down.

One afternoon, a group of Russian-speaking visitors suggested to Yurchenko that he would soon be teaching in a nice college, which is what many former Eastern-bloc officials end up doing here. Yurchenko replied that he could never do that, because he could never learn English or catch up with people who had a proper education. "I am ignorant," he said. "I have no future in this country. I am a nothing."

Yurchenko stunned the CIA when he walked out of a dinner with two of his handlers at the Georgetown restaurant Au Pied de Cochon and took a taxi to the Soviet compound a mile up Wisconsin Avenue. To date, CIA officers are certain that he was a genuine defector and not a KGB plant. One veteran handler calls the redefection "a suicide." A colleague added that it was "an act of extreme desperation" by an unstable personality. "Like many other Russians, Yurchenko is a serf looking for a lord," he says. "He was a poor, lost soul looking for moral authority, and the CIA didn't even provide him with an escort who could tune in on his wavelength."

Since Yurchenko's return to Moscow on November 2, one rumor had him jumping to his death from a fourteen-story building, and another had him shot by a firing squad. Then, in March, a West German television crew ran into him on a Moscow street, allegedly by coincidence. He told them he was writing a book about the torture and the drugs to which the CIA had subjected him.

One American who met Yurchenko remembers him as "a coarse, primitive, brutal type" who concluded, after two women jilted him and his CIA handlers soured on him, that while he was a smart enough brute to rise in the KGB, he would never have the finesse to be very successful in American society.

"Yurchenko realized that nobody here liked him," he says, "and that he was indeed a nothing."